

The greatest show on earth

Tom Pilon

The interview is virtually over when Richard Wright mentions the donkey's knob. My ears prick up. I'm trained to recognise the more newsworthy elements that might make a feature special and this could be one of them.

I must say, though, it does seem a none-too-tasteful subject to broach in such chic surroundings. The Pink Floyd keyboardist and I are discussing the new Floyd DVD, *Pulse*, in his London mews house, not far from Earls Court, the scene of some of the Floyd's greatest triumphs, including the extraordinary 1994 concert featured in the DVD.

The show is surely one of the most lavish stage presentations ever attempted. The performance is like a piece of exquisite jewellery: the dazzling light and film show and the stately, methodical music are the beautifully wrought settings for the gemstones of individual skills – usually Dave Gilmour or Tim Renwick's guitar breaks, glittering exercises in musical elegance.

It's a long way from rock's earthier roots, so far that it's really a different type of music. The light show is the best I've seen; there are typically cryptic, surreal films projected on the giant circular screen above the stage, and the additional elements (epitomised by the giant inflatable pigs billowing from either side of the stage) are cherries on the gâteau.

"One of the things I always regret about being in Pink Floyd is that you can never go to see the show," says Wright. "I have no idea what it looks like. We know it's pretty powerful, but when you're on stage you have no clear idea of it. So when I watched it on DVD I was overwhelmed by how amazing it looks."

A large part of the show's success, Wright admits, is down to the artistry of the lighting director, Mark Brickman, who uses illumination to convey the deeper emotional impact of a song.

"Mark Brickman is a genius," says Wright. "I don't think there's anyone else's lighting that has that imagination and feel for colour. Mark says the way he lights



Wright happy: at home and (below from left) Roger Waters, Nick Mason, Syd Barrett and Wright in 1967

us is like painting a picture, and watching it, I know exactly what he means. Sometimes, he would be asked by various people, 'Could you put this spotlight on this musician?' or 'Could you give the musicians more light?' and he would get upset because it would destroy his painting. I was watching the DVD with someone last night, and they said, 'It's like the lighting at the Barcelona Olympics.' I said, 'He lit the Barcelona Olympics too.'" It's not only the lights that make the live shows

so impressive, though. The main selling point about the new double-DVD is that the second disc features the only recorded live presentation of *Dark Side of the Moon* in its entirety, complete with films, effects, the full complement of bells and whistles – something that's never likely to happen again, certainly by Pink Floyd (although Roger Waters is about to take his own *Dark Side...* show on tour). Some of it couldn't be done today. During "On the Run", the audience is watching the film of a bed careering through hospital corridors, when suddenly a blazing Second World War fighter zooms across the auditorium above their heads. Try getting that past health and safety now.

There's even a credit for a "smoke artist". This might be the chap who carried the drugs, but that kind of indulgence would be counter-productive in keeping the show running like clockwork. Wright claims he never feels upstaged by the giant pigs or any of the other effects, but admits that with a show this ambitious, the biggest problem is having to sync to the films: all the other elements are malleable, but the films are fixed.

The sheer scale of the event is best conveyed in the backstage

home movie *Say Goodbye to Life as We Know It*, one of the DVD extras. At one point the band and crew are flown to an aircraft hangar in which the stage is set up, and the entire floor of the vast hangar is covered in the equipment flight cases, a sea of black boxes. It's a long way from the band's early years, when they had one special sound effect.

"When we started, there were no synthesisers," recalls Wright. "We did all sorts of things in the studio, like making tape loops. Now, you just push a button, but we would have tape running between three Revoxes and around mike stands, through the whole control room, to get a long delay." In those days, he admits, the band's ambitions were very limited.

"When we were with Syd [Barrett, the band's original guitarist and songwriter], our ambition was probably to get a number one hit, to get on *Top of the Pops*. That was his ambition, definitely. My only ambition was: this is fun, I hope we can make a living out of this. And of course, I hope we're gonna be a huge success and sell more records than Elvis Presley and The Beatles!"

Syd got his wish, as the Floyd scored instant hits with "Arnold

Layne" and "See Emily Play". And so did Wright.

"Arnold Layne" was wonderful," he says. "We're redoing that now, on Dave's tour, and I have the pleasure of singing it! Dave suggested we do it – and we've never ever done that song live; it was from before he was in the band, in fact."

The tour with Gilmour is helping acquaint Wright with the joy of playing live, something he much prefers to the grind of studio work. It was something that came back to him last summer, when hell briefly froze over and the Floyd appeared with Roger Waters at the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park, the feuding parties' differences put aside for the moment.

"I was backstage listening to The Who, and it was wonderful," recalls Wright. "I had one problem with Live 8, and that was all this backstage business going on, and the Golden Ticket Area. I didn't like that at all. I've got nothing against David Beckham as a footballer, but I couldn't help thinking, why is David Beckham here? With Posh? It was all very corporate, and none of them was really listening to the music, they were too busy getting their free champagne and whatever."

"But apparently," he adds with obvious pride, "when Pink Floyd went on, the whole backstage area was empty! Which says something. And it was really nice that we did get on-stage again with Roger, because it was a good cause – the cause was more important than our arguments with each other. But I doubt very much whether we'd all four of us get on the road again and do a huge tour."

"I have no problem with us all maybe doing one-off shows together again, but I don't think anything more than that would work at all. But who knows? Although I have to say, I do wish the Floyd – Nick, myself and David – would go out again."

If that does ever happen, it's more likely to be at indoor arenas than huge outdoor stadia.

Touring with the Floyd is like experiencing a small city on the move, and especially so for the road crew.

"I should mention The Donkey's Knob," explained Wright. My ears pricked up. But not, alas, for long. "In the middle of the stadium there's a little room, about 12ft by 12ft, in which the roadies built a nightclub every night, called The Donkey's Knob. And after every show, the roadies would take the instruments in there and jam." They copied the show in miniature – they had a tiny little circular screen, tiny little fireworks, everything."

So the Donkey's Knob turned out to be more akin to a model village or miniature train set than a sexual peccadillo; but doesn't that perhaps speak volumes about the refined, painstaking nature of this most English of rock bands? No? Oh, have it your own way, then.

